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Schlesinger Reminds Us of What Sets America Apart

James Schlesinger is no crystal ball-gazer, so seekers of snappy 21st Century predictions are likely to be disappointed in his new book. Rewards will go instead to those who look for an understanding of why things are the way they are and what it will take to lead us successfully toward the new century.

Originally a series of three Radner lectures on public law and government at Columbia University, this slender volume capsulizes Schlesinger's belief that the things that set the United States apart from other nations are American exceptionalism, its sense of mission (bequeathed by the Puritans) and its emphasis on individualism.

American exceptionalism is an idea often talked about but little understood, Schlesinger says. He contends that America is exceptional "in the sense that its history, its assumptions and its attitudes are quite different from those European societies that gave it birth." This has led to greater freedom of action in foreign policy, but also makes it difficult for either allies or adversaries to understand us, he contends.

"America at Century's End"
By James Schlesinger
Columbia University Press
562 West 113th Street
New York, N.Y. 10025
113 pages, $18.95

The New England Puritans were driven by the belief that America's destiny was to be a "beacon unto the nations," according to Schlesinger. Rooted in Calvinism, this belief has re-emerged in secular form time and again throughout our history.

The early isolationists saw as our mission the providing of a model nation for others to emulate—the Shining City on a Hill. After World War II the mission was to bring the benefits of democratic capitalism to defeated enemies and to rebuild the ravaged lands of our allies. More recently, President Reagan saw the mission as a restoration of American self-worth, pride and confidence.

Flowing from this sense of mission has been a foreign policy based on "moralism-legalism" rather than the *realpolitik* of Europe.

Schlesinger points out that "American decisions have quite regularly been driven less by considerations of national interest than by moral outrage."

Among the examples he cites are Wilson's outrage in World War I to Germany's announcement that it would engage in unrestricted submarine warfare ("which the German high command regarded as simply a practical necessity").

More recently, he cites our outrage at Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 when the real shift in power to Soviet puppets had occurred 18 months earlier. He argues that our geographical isolation from the turmoil of other continents has given us freedom to base our policies on our moral standards, not pragmatism.

The third element in the American "mix," individualism, is a product, Schlesinger tells us, of the fact we Americans are not bound by a common ethnic background or history. Hence, we define ourselves as a nation in terms of our faith in the American Creed, embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

A legacy of this history, he says, is that "changing fashions and an unwillingness to defer to authority" means we are not very good at learning from our experiences.

Another negative facet of our individualism "is a rather special American conviction, reflecting no doubt a disregard for knowledge and for authority, that there is always some kind of management trick that will solve our problems." (If only the liberals on Capitol Hill were made to commit that observation to memory!)

In and out of government for more than a quarter-century (but always close to it), Schlesinger brings an insider's perspective to the process of government.

Director of the CIA, secretary of defense and secretary of energy, he served in two Republican administrations and one Democratic. He concludes that the office of the presidency "is inherently (that is, constitutionally) a rather weak one." Its power lies in the ability to persuade us, he says. ("The highest art of the statesman in the American system is the forging of consensus.")

While media pundits and many Democratic politicians speak longingly for a "return" to bipartisan foreign policy, such a thing is largely a myth, Schlesinger says. He notes that throughout most of our history there have been deep divisions over policy. "It was Pearl Harbor that swept away those divisions and created an instant national consensus," he says. That consensus broke up about the time of the Tet offensive in Vietnam (1968) and isn't likely to return anytime soon, he concludes.

The two dominant trends in America today that the author sees are the changes in society's behavior induced by television and the increasing precedence that electoral politics takes over the functions of government.

"Television has superseded family, party, church, social groupings as a way of shaping voters' attitudes toward politicians and issues," he tells us, along with his view that electioneering has become so pervasive that elected officials are more like weather vanes of public opinion than leaders of it.

Schlesinger has a well-developed sense of irony and it comes through, but the book's pace is marred slightly by the failure to eliminate purely rhetorical asides that were delivered to a live lecture audience.

On a clear day Schlesinger may not be able to see forever (who can?), but he certainly sees clearly where we have been, where we are and what we must know about ourselves to stay at the front of the world's stage. ■

Page 37.